

## Part IV: Development of the Comprehensive Reform Plan

### *Organizational Structure*

The Washington State Program Improvement Plan (PIP) organizational structure consists of oversight and input by Children's Administration (CA) Assistant Secretary Uma Ahluwalia. Ross Dawson, Deputy Assistant Secretary is the lead administrator in charge of the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) and the follow-up completion of the PIP. Sonja Heard is the statewide manager of the CFSR with M-K Deacon assisting and taking lead responsibility for King County (the largest metropolitan area).

A complement of community partners and agency staff have been involved throughout the CFSR process and into the development of the Program Improvement Plan (PIP). They brought a rich and active element to this plan.

### *Process to a Completed Plan*

Beginning at least a year before the CFSR onsite visit, discussions were held around the state to inform agency staff and community stakeholders about the CFSR process. Discussion of the CFSR always included information on the work that would be ahead in creating a Program Improvement Plan. CA also has had regular conversations with federal partners at the Region X Administration for Children and Families (ACF) office with regard to planning for the PIP. These conversations have been helpful in understanding the scope of the PIP and the interconnectedness of many of the needed improvements, including the process for consolidating the PIP requirements with an agency reform plan.

Washington enjoyed the advantage of being reviewed somewhat later than many other states by having consultative conversations with other states to learn about their experiences in the CFSR and PIP creation. Also, in preparation for creating the PIP, through partnership with ACF, training was offered to invited agency and community stakeholders to learn the focus and basic rudiments of the PIP. This was held soon after the onsite review.

Ten workgroups were established to focus on identified areas in the plan where improvement was needed or on areas where CA wanted the input and focus of staff and community partners on strategy to effect change. Most of these workgroups had co-facilitators representing the agency and community partners. Workgroups consisted of a very dedicated and hard-working group of agency staff and community stakeholders from every level of the participating organizations and agencies.

The ten workgroups included Tribal representation and participation from other diverse populations in our state. Participants in the workgroups throughout the CFSR process, including the PIP workgroups, have included foster parents, mental health professionals, health care professionals, Assistant Attorneys General, education

professionals, law enforcement representatives, public defenders, and many other stakeholders representing Children Administration's community partners in addition to interested agency staff.

In partnership with the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) and the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), Children's Administration hosted meetings on the East and West side of the state with interested Tribal members to receive their specific input regarding the PIP.

The workgroups were asked to make recommendations for improvement that were specific, and measurable in some form. They were charged to create benchmarks and define outcomes in the process. The workgroups were also asked to prioritize their recommendations.

The ten workgroups for the PIP were:

1. Case Review
2. Resource Family Recruitment and Retention
3. Permanency
4. Safety
5. Service Array
6. Staff and Provider Training
7. Well-being: Family Engagement/ Social Worker Contact
8. Well-being: Education
9. Well-being: Mental Health
10. Well-being: Physical Health

The workgroup reports were submitted to the CFSR/PIP project team leaders. Common themes were analyzed and synthesized by the project team and overlapping recommendations were combined. A draft report was submitted to CA management for discussion. In mid-April, Washington State's Program Improvement Plan was approved and submitted by Uma Ahluwalia, DSHS Assistant Secretary for the Children's Administration and Dennis Braddock, DSHS Secretary.

## Part V: Vision for Future Practice and Approach to Reform

The public child welfare system is full of many challenges. Daily, we face the challenge of balancing and addressing a child's needs for safety and permanency. We face the challenge of involving family members and kin in supporting the child's needs for safety and security while responding to the community that holds us accountable to maintain our vision of child and family well-being. We do all this in a time of diminishing public resources.

Amidst these challenges, we must stay focused on our vision for the goals and outcomes we want to achieve and our values as a system. First and foremost, we plant the value of keeping children safe in our communities. The value of preserving family relationships and kin connections for children is central to our vision of safety. Our commitment is to address the needs of children and families in the least intrusive way, achieving positive outcomes in our communities; outcomes that will show evidence of our use of best practices. We are committed to working together with community partners; we recognize that as a public system, this work doesn't belong to us and that we cannot do this work alone.

This plan puts our vision into sharper focus and creates a scale for us to use to measure our success in achieving safety and permanency for children. Several years ago the 'Kids Come First' Action Agenda was adopted. This plan is Phase II of that action agenda; it reaffirms our commitment to that original vision and carries us deeper into practice improvements that will gain more positive outcomes on behalf of children and families in the state.

The plan was created around the core values of safety, permanency and well-being of children in our system. Central to those values is the recognition of building relationships and involving families earlier and more meaningfully in creating opportunities for their involvement in planning for services and in the decision-making process. Also significant is the need to maintain connections between children, their parents, kin and communities when those children are removed from the care of their parents. We recognize that we must expand our array of services to address the unique and demanding needs of serving adolescents in the community. Finally, our work must be attendant to maintaining, building and sustaining community partnerships, collaboration and relationships so that all this work can be shared and strengthened by working together in pursuit of more positive outcomes for children and families in Washington.

Good, productive relationships with foster and adoptive parents (resource parents/families) are a vital part of our value structure to achieve good outcomes for children in this system. Recruiting and retaining foster and adoptive parents is a core strategy for creating a strong child welfare infrastructure. This plan details not only our understanding of the value of this concept; it promotes an action plan to get us to these outcomes.

The challenges we face will require dedicated effort; we already have many of the tools and we'll need to continue building the good will necessary to take the step forward making changes in our system. Consistency of practice around the state, between and in the regions, is a core value of this plan. Our clients and consumers must know what they can expect of us and we must know what we're expected to deliver. This provides a foundation of accountability to the community, the legislature, and ultimately, to every citizen of the state. Achieving these goals is going to require us to engage in a culture of change in our system, change that will drive us to achieve more positive and timely outcomes for the most vulnerable children and families in our community.

Our vision for change and reform does come without costs. We will need additional resources, both in staffing and expertise, to build capacity to reach the outcomes we have described. Some of the strategies and outcomes anticipate that personnel can be reassigned to cover a different role. We need to resource the training and technical assistance needs and we anticipate a legislative decision package to reflect the necessary legislative changes and fiscal additions required to reach this vision. We must maximize our potential to build partnerships with private agencies and foundations to assist us in reaching our goals, by providing both fiscal and technical support to carry out strategies in the plan. This work of partnering with the private sector has begun and will continue to be essential to reach the outcomes we seek.

Our relationships with provider partners and collaborative partners in the community are essential to our success in reaching the most positive outcomes for children and their families. Many of those partners worked side-by-side with us in developing, reviewing and providing input on the plan and the strategies for change. Their input was rich and deepened and challenged our thinking about how we can accomplish our goals. We continue to value their contributions, challenges and their commitment to assist us in achieving the goals and holding these values up to the people we serve.